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Women in Development: A Question of Research

by Eva M. Rathgeber*

In the past decade and a half, research related to women has become a legitimate topic for scientific enquiry. An increasing number of social scientists have focused attention on the condition of women in developing countries. But as they carry out their enquiries, researchers are questioning the validity of many of the methologies previously accepted without question. They are discovering that some of the key concepts, data gathering instruments and units of analysis do not record the experiences and needs of women, and they are suggesting new ways to replace the old.

Much of this effort goes on quietly. But sound research is a prerequisite of any successful project. Only when social scientists use research methodologies that take women into account will development efforts have the potential to be beneficial to all.

The Condition of Women

It is difficult and pointless to make crosscultural generalizations about the condition, interests and needs of women in developing countries. All countries are at different levels of development and modernization. Each society has its own cultures and traditions and the situation of women must be examined to some extent in the context of these local conditions. Indeed the concept of modernization itself is often vaguely defined and used.

In the 1950s and 60s, popular wisdom had it that modernization, which was to be achieved through industrialization, would uplift the standards of living of the developing countries. It was argued that through massive expansion of the educational systems, a stock of well-trained workers and managers would emerge. This development in turn would enable static, essentially agrarian economies to evolve into industrialized and modernized societies. With the growth of the economies of these countries, the benefits of modernization, such as better living conditions, wages, education and health services would trickle down to all segments of the society.

Women rarely, if ever, were considered as a separate unit of analysis in the research of this period. It was assumed that the norm of men's experience also applied to women, and that everyone would benefit as a society increasingly became modernized.

By the 1970s, this view of modernization was being questioned by many researchers, who argued that the relative position of women had, in fact, improved very little over the past two decades. There was even evidence that suggested that the position of some women had declined. For example, women were less likely to benefit from the surge of educational expansion. Enrolment figures, especially at the tertiary level of education, tended to be lower for women than for men. (Even today, if China is excluded, the global literacy rate for women is lower than for men - 68 per cent as compared to 78 per cent). As new technologies were introduced into agriculture, they were usually directed towards men rather than women.

In the formal industrial sector, women often were relegated to jobs that paid the least, were the most

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monotonous and sometimes injurious to health. This condition came about because of women's low levels of education, and also because of the role assigned them as supplementary rather than principal wage earners.
It is useful to examine briefly the current role of women the rural, informal and formal sectors to gauge the extent to which their situation actually has improved as a result of development.

Rural Women

In many developing countries women are the principal producers of food. For example, it has been estimated that in Africa, women produce from 70 to 90 per cent of domestically consumed food. The subordinate role of women in most African societies has ensured the continuation of the traditional division of agricultural tasks between men and women . Women undertake chores such as weeding and hoeing.

Men clear the land and plough with the help of draft animals or tractors. Interestingly, male roles revolve around the handling of material possessions and the accumulation of wealth while women undertake the more tedious, repetitive work associated with farm maintenance. Men rarely assist women with tasks that are seen as traditionally female, like household chores, weeding and childcare. Further, women are brought up to feel that they must work hard to justify the bride price which their husbands pay their fathers, and to accept the ultimate authority of their husbands.

Migration of men

In many developing countries, men migrate to the cities in search of employment. For example, a study carried out in Zimbabwe in 1982 found that twice as many women as men above the age of 15 are peasants. At the time of Zimbabwean independence in April 1980, there were 780,000 peasant families and of these, 235,000 had male members working in the urban areas.

The migration of men can have both positive and negative impacts on the situation of the women and children left behind. An increase in household income often benefits the health, nutrition, and educational opportunities of all family members. It may also provide a source of funds for farm improvement and modernization. At the same time, the absence of male family members can have a negative effect on the workloads and responsibilities undertaken by women. For example, Olivia Muchena, a Zimbabwean researcher, has noted that despite the fact that women are important agricultural producers of both subsistence and cash crops in Zimbabwe, their involvement in rural development often is limited by a number of important factors.

One of these is the "double-day". Women are forcec to perform dual roles, both as agricultural workers and as homemakers and mothers. Thus, the migration of the men to the urban areas has meant that women have to do all the agricultural work, when formerly they shared such tasks as land clearing and certain functions of harvesting with the men. At the same time, women look after their children and undertake time-consuming household tasks such as fetching water from wells that are often located far away, collecting firewood, and preparing food.

Divided families

Now that large numbers of men are migrating to the cities of Africa and the urban unemployment rate is rising, the women left at home find themselves providing their male family members with social security and unemployment insurance. Ironically, men who are employed in the urban areas have a control over a larger share of family income (since wage employment yields greater remuneration in monetary terms), while the women do more and more work in the rural areas.
Furthermore, men often come home at harvest time and take the money from the sale of surplus crops, sometimes leaving their wives with barely enough tc sustain themselves and their children, and little to reinvest in the land.

Ownership and control

In the precolonial period women often were the owners of land because it belonged to the person who worked it. However, the European colonial powers introduced the notion that the ownership of land was vested in the male head of the household. Consequently, although women now may be the only ones working on the land while their husbands spend most of their time in an urban area, the men are still the legal owners. This means that women cannot use land as security for gaining credit to buy seeds, fertilizers, and agricultural equipment or for expanding their farming operations. It also means that a man has the right to return to the land and repossess it whenever he wishes (even if he brings with him a second wife) and to make the final decisions about how the land will be used.

Technology and training

In the past, development planners have often put their faith in technology to solve agricultural problems and to ease farm workloads. But technological progress sometimes has increased inequalities between men and women because new technology has increased the work done by women

For example, the introduction of high-yielding varieties of seeds often means more weeding and the production of larger and more frequent harvests.

Indeed the mechanization of agriculture usually has benefitted male farmers rather than female. Extension programmes to increase the skills of farmers are most commonly oriented towards men, and any training for women emphasizes domestic activities, home economics. Extension workers in most African countries have done very little to teach women modern agricultural methods or the use of modern equipment.

In nearly all countries, agricultural training at low, middle, and high levels is given to men only. This tactic, of course, produces exclusively male instructors who in turn address themselves to male farmers. This lack of training in agriculture for women is derived from the general belief - shared by many agricultural experts - that the use of female agricultural labour is backward and that it should if possible be replaced by male labour when agriculture is modernized.

Replaced by technology

Development" has, in many cases, increased the workloads of women, and introduced devices which perform tasks for which women formerly were hired. For example, in southern India and Indonesia, rice mills, in which men are hired to work with machines, are replacing traditional husking operations for which women were engaged. For women, this was once a major source of regular income and no other income-generating work has been introduced to replace it. In rice harvesting, mechanization is also becoming increasingly common, with men hired to run the machines.

A classic case of women being eased out of a traditional source of employment has occurred in Bangladesh. Here the forced change in rice husking from manual to steel-roller hullers has had an adverse impact. After direct crop production, the rural post-harvest rice industry traditionally had been the biggest employer of both men and women.

Post-harvest earnings had been a high proportion of total earnings for the poorest families in Bangladesh and some or all women participated in the wage labour market. However, women now are being displaced by commercial operations which use rice processing equipment and male wage labour.

In sum then, it seems that, although women are major food producers, their role rarely is recognized by governments. They are denied land ownership and credit facilities. They are ignored by extension programmes. Their presence in agricultural production is seen as an indication of lingering traditionalism rather than as an integral part of growth and development.

Women in the informal sector

There is no agreement on the definition of "informal sector", but it generally is considered to include small-scale economic activities, often based on family labour. These activities require little capital investment, provide l income and are not covered by social legislation such as minimum wages or safety regulations. Th appears to be a clear sexual division of labour wit the informal sector. Women perform tasks that resemble their family role and they predominate in occupations that give much lower return for their labour. The employment alternatives for such women tend to be minimal and their earnings usu are essential for family maintenance.

An area where women make a substantial contribution and are often vastly underpaid is in handicrafts production. In Narsapur district in Indi secluded women make an important economic contribution through lace-making in their own homes, even though they earn about one-fifth of t official daily rate of pay for women and have to sel their work to western women through an extensive network of non-producing male agents, traders an exporters. About 90 per cent of the handicraft exp earnings of Narsapur district is based on the labou of these invisible workers.

In Zimbabwe, a similar situation exists in the production of crocheted dresses, shawls and scarves by African women working at home. Agen often men or white women, supply the raw materia When the work is completed, the women sell it bac to the agents. It can take up to five days to produc a crocheted dress. After materials have been paid for, the women may find themselves with as little a three or four dollars for their work.

Despite such undervaluing of their labour, work in the informal sector allows women a degree of freedom and flexibility to combine their income-generating activities with childrearing and household responsibilities. It also offers some escape from complete dependency on men for cas income. Moreover. in countries where the integrati of women into the formal industrial wage sector is incomplete, women's income-generating activities i the informal sector may serve as an important psychological and sociological bridge to society's acceptance of women working outside the home.

Women's wage labour

In many countries, the situation of women in formal wage employment is also difficult. In Mexico, for example, women are often hired in industries that

have some "craft" connection. Women work mostly in the first and final stages of production, preparing raw materials and selecting and arranging items in the first stages, and assembling parts or packaging in the final stages. However, it is the middle stages which usually require technical skills; therefore, no matter how modern the technology, women usually are not trained to use it.

During the past two decades, an important new source of employment has emerged for women, especially in Asia and Latin America. An increasing number of transnational companies are locating manufacturing and assembly plants away from their home countries. These industries tend either to be labour intensive or to include some labour intensive processes for which the companies have traditionally hired women. The electronics industry offers a good example. By the mid-1970's there were about one million workers employed in off-shore electronics assembly factories in Asia, 90 per cent of them female.

Conditions for woman workers often are extremely poor. The work is monotonous and requires intense concentration. Health problems, including eyestrain, headaches and stomach ailments, are frequent. The firms usually hire inexperienced, unmarried women, aged between 16 and 22, with about nine years of formal education (so that they will have learned the discipline and good work habits taught in the formal education system). The youth and unmarried status of the female labour force enables the companies to avoid the costs of social benefits such as maternity leave and day care. Plant shutdowns are frequent and workers are laid off without compensation.

The assumption is that women are working temporarily and that their salaries are pin money. This assumption is made despite the fact that in Singapore, for instance, the high cost of living makes a second family income necessary for survival. And in Malaysia, with the high rate of unemployment for men, a woman's wages are often her family's sole source of income.

In sum, the massive employment of women in these labour-intensive, high technology industries reinforces the subordinate status of women and encourages them to serve as cheap labour, or to accept intolerable conditions. Concurrently, the lack of equal opportunities in education and training for women often prohibits their entry into safer, more stable and higher-income occupations.

Methodologies for research on women

In the past, development workers tended to overlook the special needs of women and have assumed that projects would affect men, women and children equally. Similarly, development researchers from the 1950s to the first half of the '70s assumed that the methodologies they used to gather information about the conditions and needs of Third World populations informed them of the situation of both sexes equally. Researchers relied heavily on census surveys, interviews with male heads of households and the counting of paid labour force participation.

Not surprisingly, these methods completely subsumed the economic contributions of most women in developing countries. During the past decade, researchers have become more aware of this problem and have made efforts to develop research methodologies that more accurately reflect the participation of women in the economy.

What is labour?

In the past, the concept of "labour" has been defined in a relatively inflexible way. For example, census surveys have tended to count only that work which is performed outside the home, or that which feeds directly into a market economy. Consequently, the surveys consistently undercounted the work done by women. Women's work might be seasonal, for instance, or not necessarily fit into a "referrent week". Or it might be integrated into domestic work and therefore difficult to separate out both in terms of time allotment and actual monetary value.

Activities commonly carried out by women, such as animal husbandry, food processing and unpaid gathering, were usually not counted as labour force participation. Similarly, it was often difficult for respondents to distinguish among terms such as "main activity", "job", and "work", all common categories in census and labour force surveys.

Some feminist researchers have suggested that if women's work is to be appropriately valued, the distinction between public and private functions must be reconsidered. Women's work should be seen as a continuum, beginning with duties in the private domestic sphere through to participation in full-time formal employment.

Such a reconceptualization of labour force participation would ensure that a greater proportion of the economic activities of women would actually be counted. However, this would solve only part of the problem. It does not address the issue of the unit of analysis.

The individual, the household, the community

In measuring economic activity, researchers have usually focused on the individual. Most commonly, census-takers have addressed themselves to the "head of household". For reasons which may be more cultural than economic, and may have to do

with the bias of the interviewer, that individual has usually been male. This focus has further obsured the economic contribution of women in the family, particularly if they are not engaged in paid employment outside the household.

More recently the household has been used as a unit of analysis. This category captures the contribution of women in a broader sense, but it is often used in such a way as to emphasize the dichotomy between public and private work. Public work, which is market-oriented, commonly has a higher status than private work which centres on the maintenance of the family.

This division has led some researchers to suggest that while it is useful to study the internal structure of household units, they should also be analyzed within the context of local economies. Households can be seen as functional units that expand and contract in response to economic conditions.

Similarly, researchers are beginning to recognize that the concept of the household as a unit of analysis carries a western bias. In many cases alternative units such as kinship groups, community groups, or women's or men's groups may yield more meaningful data on the distribution of tasks and power.

Problems in data gathering

There are many problems inherent in traditional survey techniques. Interviewers are often biased and they may ask question which are difficult to answer. Respondents are asked to list their activities during a referrent week, but often for categories like housework, which are so broad as to be meaningless. In addition, the seasonality of certain activities is often ignored.

In recent years, researchers have used the time-budgeting method to ensure a more accurate picture of all activities. The researcher either stays with a respondent and notes all activities undertaken within a 24-hour period. Or s/he asks the respondent to list everything that she does from the time that she gets up in the morning until the time that she retires at night.

A number of other alternative qualitative methodologies are gaining increasing favour with researchers working on gender issues. For example, group discussions are often used as a means of encouraging women to speak out about problems that they would be too shy to discuss on an individual basis.

Researchers use histories to explore in depth the past experience of a respondent and to understand what lies beneath her view of herself and her relationship with her family and community.

Another technique is the use of testimonials in whi a respondent reveals certain life experiences in great detail. This information then can be used to analyze structurally a woman's relationship with th world around her. Researchers also use role play enable women to recreate certain experiences, or act out perceptions of the social structures within which they live.

All of these methods allow the respondent to describe her opinions and feelings in a slightly less direct, but possibly more emotive way. Women cai express themselves openly in the company of pee away from the presence of male relatives who may inhibit such expression.

One drawback of such alternative methods is that they capture the views of only relatively small numbers of subjects at any given time. However, it can be argued that the quality of this information is much richer and more revealing than that produce by standard quantitative survey techniques.

The methods have also been called biased, because they usually involve the active participatic of the researcher in dialogue with the respondents

In fact, they were not designed to ensure that the researcher remained objective. On the contrary, a growing literature denies the very possibility of objectivity within research on the social sciences, and applauds the forthright participation of the researcher in the research process. At the very least, these qualitative methods should be used to supplement and enrich quantitative data.

Important but not recognized

In the early 1970s, the field of research related to women was dominated by researchers in the North but in the past decade there has been a growing interest in this topic among developing country researchers. The massive participation of women from developing countries in the 1985 NGO Forum at Nairobi, which marked the end of the UN Decad for Women, was a graphic illustration of the very re commitment of developing country women to bettering their own conditions.

Similarly, the number of developing country researchers who are examining the condition of women has increased dramatically. It is unfortunate that because they are addressing themselves to home audiences rather than to international ones, their work is little known in international academic circles.

In addition, most of this research on women, both in the industrialized and in the developing countries, is

carried out by women. This is not a negative thing in itself, of course, but it does reflect the fact that most male researchers have not yet fully accepted the need to conduct research in this area. It is important that men begin to participate more regularly in these studies, not as directors, leaders or mentors, but as partners in the process of uncovering information about the differential impact of development on women.

Suggested for further reading

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